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A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

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THE MARROW AND THE DRY BONES OSSIFIED ORTHODOXY AND THE BATTLE FOR THE GOSPEL IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SCOTTISH CALVINISM

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That the Marrow controversy 'is from beginning to end a most revealing commentary on Scottish Theology'¹ is not to be doubted. The issues it raised touch the very heart of the Reformed faith, to the extent that what was at stake was not the merit of one mere human publication, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, but the very nature of the gospel and the free grace of God itself. Not surprisingly, then, a wide variety of subsequent works in Scottish church history and theology reveal virtual unanimity in praise and esteem for the 'representers', or Marrowmen, and their stand against the General Assembly. All are agreed that a subtly legalistic doctrine of conditional grace pervaded much preaching in Scotland in the early eighteenth century. All are agreed that 'the precious truths of the gospel' were 'wounded by the condemnatory act'² of 1720 which was well worthy of its epithet, the 'Black Act'. But, in more recent contemporary debate at least, all have not agreed as to whether the root of such perfidious legalism was inherent in the federal Calvinism of the Westminster standards themselves. So, while the Assembly's decision is universally deplored, and Marrowmen such as Thomas Boston held up by all sides as among the 'brightest lights in the firmament of the Reformed Church in Scotland',³ there has been some disagreement as to which side in the controversy had the better claim to the orthodoxy of the Westminster standards— in the letter as well as in spirit.

Divergent Interpretations

On the one hand, scholars of Barthian persuasion such as J.B. Torrance⁴ and M.C. Bell⁵ have applauded the Marrowmen as true theologians of

¹ J.B. Torrance, 'Covenant or Contract? A study in the Theological Background of Worship in Seventeenth-Century Scotland', *SJT* 23 (1970), p. 59.

² Representers' answers to the Assembly Commission's questions, quoted in S.B. Ferguson, *The Grace of God in the Gospel: Some Lessons From the Marrow Controversy* (Aberdeen, 1981), p. 5.

³ J. Macleod, *Scottish Theology* (Edinburgh, 1974), p. 153.

⁴ 'Covenant or Contract?'. See also 'The Covenant Concept in Scottish Theology and Politics and its Legacy', *SJT* 34 (1981) pp. 225-43;

SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

grace, though still struggling to do justice to free grace within a framework of federal theology, because they failed to see clearly enough that the 'legalism against which they were protesting grew in no small measure out of federalism itself'.⁶ Yet they view Boston and his colleagues as sensing enough of its dangers that in their hearts at least they were making a definite departure from the Calvinism of the Westminster Confession 'back to the theology of the Reformers and the older Scottish tradition'.⁷ As such they were true prototypes of John McLeod Campbell who 'was to raise the same issues in a more thorough-going way a hundred years later, and be condemned on similar grounds'.⁸ Thus, although on this view the General Assembly of 1720 was quite wrong *per se* in condemning *The Marrow*, they would have to concede that technically the Assembly was correct in detecting a departure from the prevailing orthodoxy of the Westminster Confession, and thus censuring the representatives.

On the other hand, Donald Macleod⁹ represents the view of the majority of Scottish Calvinist theologians in vigorously defending the confessional orthodoxy of the Marrowmen, claiming *The Marrow* as 'quintessential Federal Theology', and regarding it 'quite absurd to suggest that it represented a radical departure from historic Calvinism; and endlessly irritating to be told that it belongs to the school of McLeod

'Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology', in *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today*, ed. A.I.C. Heron (Edinburgh, 1982); 'The Contribution of McLeod Campbell to Scottish Theology', *SJT* 26 (1973), pp. 295-311; 'The Incarnation and Limited Atonement', *EQ* 55 (1983), pp. 83-94.

⁵ *Calvin and Scottish Theology* (Edinburgh, 1995).

⁶ Torrance, 'Covenant or Contract?', p. 63.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.60.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ 'Federal Theology—An Oppressive Legalism?', *Banner of Truth*, Feb. 1974, pp. 21-8; 'Faith as Assurance', *Free Church Monthly Record*, May 1988, pp. 99-101. See also Ferguson, *The Grace of God in the Gospel*; J. Philip, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: An Exposition* (Edinburgh, 1984). John Murray of Princeton and Westminster, one of the most influential of orthodox Reformed theologians of the twentieth century, can also be seen to expound Westminster theology in clear Marrow terms. See *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vols. 1-2 (Edinburgh 1976).

THE MARROW AND THE DRY BONES

Campbell rather than to the school of Westminster'.¹⁰ It is somewhat ironic, then, that it is those very theologians most determined to defend Westminster orthodoxy today who must assert that the Assembly of 1720, though ostensibly having the same purpose in mind, nevertheless made a grave theological misjudgement not only in spirit, but also technically in the letter.

More Fundamental Issues

On a cursory glance at these conflicting views of the controversy, one might imagine that this is nothing more than both sides of a dogmatic debate seeking to claim the support of theological heroes from a somewhat romanticised past, and exhibiting the usual tendency to venerate those seen as martyrs to a theological cause. But the sharp divergence of opinion over the later case of McLeod Campbell betrays the real substantive differences in the claims of these two sides, and careful examination reveals that much more fundamental questions are at stake. If the Marrowmen were indeed truly in conflict with the Westminster Confession, then those within the Scottish church today who align themselves with the evangelical zeal of Boston and his friends in preaching unconditional grace to 'every man without exception'¹¹ must surely question whether they can give assent to the same Confession today.¹² If however the Marrowmen were right in their resolute claim to orthodoxy, it is of perhaps even more vital importance to ask why this

¹⁰ 'Faith as Assurance', p. 99.

¹¹ Evangelista's words, in answer to Neophytus's question as to whether such a one as he had 'any warrant to believe in Christ', are here taken from Preston's treatise of faith: 'Go, tell every man without exception, that here is good news for him; Christ is dead for him; and if he will take him, and accept of his righteousness, he shall save him.' *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, edition with notes by Boston (London, 1837), pp. 106-7.

¹² Assuming that one seeks with any integrity to be true to the spirit of the liberty-of-opinion clause, the scope of which was of course strictly limited in intent when first introduced into the United Presbyterian Declaratory Act in 1879 and the Free Church one in 1892, rather than abuse it in such an open-ended way as to extend liberty of opinion to any doctrine one cares to choose.

SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

same orthodoxy and indeed 'active zeal for the purity of doctrine'¹³ in their opponents could yet issue in such a legalistic, condition-laden understanding of the offer of Christ to sinners that took the 'grace of God in the gospel and dis-graced it'¹⁴ until it became no gospel at all.

That the answer to these questions must be sought more through careful historical enquiry than by dogmatic assertion would seem obvious, yet the surprising fact is that this period of the eighteenth-century Scottish church has been somewhat neglected as an area of scholarly historical study until recent decades, leaving many of the issues rather clouded in uncertainty, and hence the precise force of this 'revealing commentary on Scottish Theology' somewhat muted. Two recent works of this nature have however shed much light upon the subject. D.C. Lachman's survey¹⁵ is a magisterial historical and theological study of the whole Marrow controversy from 1717 to 1723, dealing comprehensively with all the primary documentation for the first time, while A.T.B. McGowan's thesis¹⁶ is concerned to expound systematically the theology of Thomas Boston, the leading theologian among the Marrow Brethren. We have room only to advance briefly some of their conclusions, but together these studies clear away many myths, and provide answers to some of the crucial questions.

Lachman's research leads him to conclude that despite what has often been averred, the entire ecclesiastical process was itself on the whole fair. Certainly, 'the various leading men had their usual influence' but 'there is no evidence of coercion or manipulation in the proceedings'¹⁷ and the condemnation of *The Marrow* by the Assembly was 'indicative of a corresponding unanimity of opinion in the church at large'.¹⁸ The primary consideration was definitely a doctrinal one, and the 'Assembly's Act must therefore be evaluated primarily on doctrinal grounds'.¹⁹ This Lachman does in a thoroughgoing way, by wide-ranging comparison of the Marrow doctrines to the theology of the Westminster

¹³ J. Cunningham, *The Church History of Scotland*, vol. II (Edinburgh, 1882), p. 256.

¹⁴ Ferguson, *The Grace of God in the Gospel*, p. 11.

¹⁵ *The Marrow Controversy* (Edinburgh, 1988).

¹⁶ 'The Federal Theology of Thomas Boston' (Aberdeen PhD thesis, 1990).

¹⁷ Lachman, *Marrow Controversy*, p. 479.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 477.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 485.

THE MARROW AND THE DRY BONES

standards and the writings of Reformed theologians from the early to late seventeenth-century.

On the crucial question of the 'warrant' or universal gospel-offer stressed in *The Marrow*,²⁰ which Hadow claimed must entail a doctrine of universal atonement, an examination of the context reveals plainly that there is no reference here to the extent of the atonement, and that 'Christ is dead for him' is merely a paraphrase of the gospel offer.²¹ Support for this is found in such orthodox divines as John Owen and James Durham among many others, and it is made clear that *The Marrow* merely 'stresses that which all teach, a gospel offer to all' and 'though placing no emphasis on it, affirms a limited atonement'.²² Rather, it was those who opposed *The Marrow* who misunderstood both the nature and foundation of the gospel offer.²³ By separating Christ from his benefits, Hadow and others had begun to 'fall into the categories of Arminianism'²⁴ and reduced the gospel to a message about the benefits of Christ's death. Boston and his friends, along with true Reformed orthodoxy, preached not mere benefits, but 'a *Saviour* who is full of grace and able to save to the uttermost all those who come to God by him'.²⁵ The consistent teaching of Reformed orthodoxy is therefore a particular redemption and a real, free offer to all; but framed in the context of an evangelistic encounter in *The Marrow* the emphasis is quite correctly on the free offer to sinners, while in the Westminster Confession there is special reference of the atonement to the elect.²⁶

²⁰ That Christ 'hath taken upon himself the sins of all men' (from Luther), 'hath made a deed of gift and grant unto them all' (from Culverwell) and 'is dead for [every man without exception]' (from Preston). *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, pp.81, 106-7.

²¹ Boston's notes are quite categorical: 'This is the good old way of discovering to sinners their warrant to believe in Christ; and it doth indeed bear the sufficiency of the sacrifice of Christ for all, and that Christ crucified is the ordinance of God for salvation unto all mankind, in the use-making of which only they can be saved; but *not an universal atonement or redemption*' (*The Marrow*, p. 106).

²² Lachman, *Marrow Controversy*, p. 28 (italics mine).

²³ McGowan, 'Boston', p. 90-91.

²⁴ Ferguson, *The Grace of God in the Gospel*, p.10.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ This is *not* to say that the Marrowmen somehow downplayed what was apparently a central tenet of their theology; it merely displays a

Covenant Unconditional and Conditional

Concerning the nature of the covenant of grace, Lachman cites numerous orthodox covenant theologians in support of the *Marrow* view of the covenant as wholly unconditional to men and women – faith not as a condition, but an instrument – and concludes that there are ‘no grounds for regarding the *Marrow* as antinomian in this respect’²⁷ but rather that the opponents were tinged to a greater or lesser extent with the neonomianism of Richard Baxter and Daniel Williams. Reaction to antinomianism in the seventeenth-century led some later Puritans to teach the necessity of preparation prior to regeneration, and this had apparently become prevalent in Scotland, laying a precedent for opposition to the *Marrow* doctrine²⁸ which preached any sinner’s freedom to come to Christ. But orthodox divines had always held that even ‘if it were possible that a soul would come without a sense of sin, grace would embrace it; *sense of sin being no condition for the covenant*’.²⁹ Indeed Rutherford himself declared that ‘none ever taught that Evangelicke Repentance is a prior preparation to conversion’.³⁰ McGowan points out that Hadow’s defence of his position from the Westminster Confession here is guilty of disgraceful selectivity, omitting all reference to repentance as ‘an evangelical grace ... not to be rested in as ... any cause of the pardon’ for sin, and merely wresting out of context the words ‘[repentance] is of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it’.³¹ Lachman offers a further great weight of

careful biblical balance. ‘While Reformed confessions may begin with statements on the doctrine of God and the divine decrees, that is not where preachers and teachers need to begin in addressing men about salvation. In the apostolic preaching to the lost, recorded in the book of Acts, nothing is said of the doctrine of election, while in the Epistles it is scarcely ever omitted.’ I. Murray, *Spurgeon vs Hyper-Calvinism* (Edinburgh, 1995), p. 115.

²⁷ Lachman, *Marrow Controversy*, p. 54.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

²⁹ J. Durham, *The Unsearchable Riches of Christ*, quoted in Lachman, p. 60 (italics mine). Durham is thought to have co-authored the *Sum of Saving Knowledge* with David Dickson.

³⁰ *Christ Dying and Drawing Sinners to Himself* (London, 1647), in Lachman, *Marrow Controversy*, p. 62.

³¹ McGowan, ‘Boston’, p. 309 (quoting Westminster Confession 15:3).

THE MARROW AND THE DRY BONES

evidence, and concludes that *The Marrow* is fully 'in accord with Reformed orthodoxy in making evangelical repentance a consequence of faith'.³² A similar verdict is passed on the relationship of good works to salvation, where he finds Hadow in harmony with the neonomianism of Williams, stressing that '[God] who made faith necessary to justification, hath made obedience necessary to sanctification'.³³ The *Marrow* position of Christ as 'the way' and good works 'a believer's walking in the way'³⁴ is far more representative of Reformed orthodoxy than was the General Assembly.³⁵

Assurance Contested

Lachman's treatment of the doctrine of assurance is perhaps the weakest point in his thesis. He assumes that there was a clear change in the understanding of this doctrine in the mid seventeenth-century,³⁶ the problem then being that *The Marrow* reflected the orthodoxy of its own day that assurance was of the essence of faith, whereas Hadow and the Assembly held the later view that it was not. Lachman states that 'The Westminster Confession cannot be asserted with confidence to support either point of view', because 'not commenting on the relation of assurance to saving faith, the Assembly meant to allow room for

³² Lachman, *Marrow Controversy*, pp. 66, 487.

³³ Daniel Williams, *Gospel Truth*, quoted in Lachman, p. 72.

³⁴ *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, p. 186.

³⁵ Lachman, *Marrow Controversy*, pp. 73, 486-7.

³⁶ There is considerable debate among contemporary Calvin scholars over the alleged gulf between the understanding of assurance in Calvin and in later Calvinists. See R.T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford, 1979); M.C. Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology* (Edinburgh, 1985); H. Rolston III, *John Calvin versus the Westminster Confession* (Richmond, VA, 1972); opposing views in P. Helm, 'Calvin, English Calvinism and the Logic of Doctrinal Development', *SJT* 34 (1981), pp. 179-85, *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Edinburgh 1982), 'Calvin and the Covenant: Unity and Continuity', *EQ* 55 (1983), pp. 65-81; D. Macleod, 'Misunderstandings of Calvinism', *Banner of Truth*, Aug. 1966, pp. 9-13, 'Federal Theology—An Oppressive Legalism?', *Banner of Truth*, Feb. 1974, pp. 21-8, 'Faith as Assurance', *Free Church Monthly Record*, May 1988, pp. 99-101.

SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

disagreement'.³⁷ But a reading of both the Confession and the Larger Catechism make it quite plain that for them assurance is not of the essence of saving faith,³⁸ and furthermore, if *The Marrow* did so reflect the orthodoxy of 1645, it is indeed strange that the Confession, which itself enshrined the orthodoxy of 1645, should appear markedly different.

Systematic examination of Boston's doctrine makes it clear that he was in complete harmony with the Confession's position that our salvation depends on our state and not our knowledge of it, so that one 'can go to heaven in a mist not knowing whether he is going'.³⁹ Yet it is also clear from his extensive notes on *The Marrow* in this context that he recognises a certain objective assurance, not the infallible subjective 'kind of assurance which the Westminster Confession expressly treats, but an assurance which is *in faith*...a fiducial *appropriating persuasion*,'⁴⁰ which is a constituent element in saving faith.⁴¹ Boston quotes Rutherford as having made this distinction in earlier times,⁴² and indeed Lachman⁴³ admits that the Reformers themselves 'did qualify their assertions by admitting that this assurance was capable of degrees'.⁴⁴ I am inclined to

³⁷ Lachman, *Marrow Controversy*, p. 486.

³⁸ e.g. Answer to Q 81: 'Assurance of grace and salvation not being of the essence of saving faith...'

³⁹ Thomas Boston, *Works*, vol.2, p.18, in McGowan, 'Boston', p. 324.

⁴⁰ *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, pp. 95-106 (italics mine).

⁴¹ This distinction is spelled out most clearly by Ebenezer Erskine, another of the Marrow Brethren, when he expounds the difference between the assurance of faith and the assurance of sense. 'The assurance of faith is a *direct*, but the assurance of sense is a *reflex* act of the soul. ... The object of the assurance of faith is a *Christ revealed, promised and offered* in the word; the object of the assurance of sense is a *Christ formed within us by the Holy Spirit*. The assurance of faith is the *cause*, that of sense is the *effect*' (*Works*, vol. 1, p. 270, in McGowan, 'Boston', p. 334). John Murray takes this distinction between such a primary or direct act and the secondary or reflex act as axiomatic, so that 'whatever we may call the respective acts the distinction is too obvious to need any elaborate defence' ('The Assurance of Faith', *Banner of Truth*, June 1972, p. 17).

⁴² *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, Notes on p. 215.

⁴³ Lachman, *Marrow Controversy*, p. 10.

⁴⁴ This is essentially in line with the conclusion of A.N.S. Lane in 'Calvin's Doctrine of Assurance', *Vox Evangelica* 9 (1979), pp. 32-54.

THE MARROW AND THE DRY BONES

agree with McGowan⁴⁵ that a more reasonable conclusion from the available evidence is that the Reformers also believed in both subjective and objective assurance, but without spelling out either in any great detail, and that gradually the distinction was made, with at times variously more weight given to each side. At any rate, as Beaton also concludes after extensive examination, it must be quite clear 'that the Marrowmen did not hold the view that the assurance referred to by the *Westminster Confession* is of the essence of faith'.⁴⁶

Conclusions

We must conclude, then, that the General Assembly was unjustified not only in spirit but also in the letter in condemning *The Marrow*, which is in no way 'demonstrably in conflict with the Westminster Standards'.⁴⁷ Far from being in dispute with federal theology *per se*, Boston and his brethren were consistent federal Calvinists contending against legalistic and neonomian perversions of Westminster orthodoxy. Why then did the representers lose their case so comprehensively, when as Lachman points out, the Assembly's charges, if true, would have been valid against so much of Reformed orthodoxy?⁴⁸ Hog's inadequate defence of *The Marrow*;⁴⁹ the incredible theological ignorance among ministers—particularly of the writings of the early seventeenth-century divines; the general fear of the *bête noire* of antinomianism; and, perhaps most importantly, Hadow's misrepresentation of *The Marrow* creating a man of straw in the popular imagination which was then easily destroyed—

⁴⁵ 'Boston', p. 346.

⁴⁶ D. Beaton, 'The "Marrow of Modern Divinity" and the Marrow Controversy', *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 1 (1926), p. 126 (italics mine).

⁴⁷ Lachman, *Marrow Controversy*, p. 491.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 487.

⁴⁹ One wonders why Thomas Boston seems not to have played a greater role in pleading the Marrow case in the pamphlet battles, and in the Assembly debates themselves. Perhaps we get a clue in his own memoirs, when, great preacher as he was, he says of himself: 'I was addicted to silence, rather than to talking. I was no good spokesman, but very unready, even in common conversation; and in disputes, especially at a loss when engaged with persons of great assurance', quoted in A. Thomson, *Thomas Boston of Ettrick: His Life and Times* (Edinburgh, 1895), p. 252.

SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

these all played a part. Moreover, the ablest literature defending *Marrow* theology appeared only subsequent to the controversy,⁵⁰ when the battle was lost. These factors are doubtless all important, as Lachman indicates; but despite all, one is still left with a sense of mystery — of something unexplained, stones left unturned, questions not fully asked or answered.

Yet perhaps the most important question is why such a controversy should arise in the first place — why such numbers of ministers of the gospel, though thoroughly Reformed in their confessional subscription, could ‘in their hearts be so closed up to God’s people, and to the lost of all nations’, that they could oppose the gospel of free grace so vehemently? The answer cannot be historical, but must be spiritual. ‘They did not preach free grace, they did not show free grace, because they did not *know* free grace.’ ‘They had hold of the wrappings of the system of grace, “the doctrine of grace”. But they had not been mastered by the gift which lay within, in the heart of the Christ of God. They were Calvinists with the minds and hearts of natural men — as far as this truth was concerned.’⁵¹ C.H. Spurgeon, who stood firmly in the *Marrow* tradition against Hyper-Calvinists in England a century later, has the heart of it when he affirms that though sound doctrine is essential, it is not enough. ‘You may have sound doctrine and yet do nothing unless you have Christ in your spirit. ... When love dies, orthodox doctrine becomes a corpse, a powerless formalism. Adhesion to the truth sours into bigotry when the sweetness and light of love to Jesus depart Lose love, lose all.’⁵² The lesson to be drawn from both these controversies is summed up in John Murray’s conclusion: ‘when Calvinism ceases to be evangelistic, when it becomes more concerned with theory than with the salvation of men and women, when acceptance of doctrines seems to become more important than acceptance of Christ, then it is a system going to seed and it will invariably lose its power’.⁵³ This was what was at the heart of the *Marrow* controversy, and this is what Boston and his brethren set their faces resolutely against. For those who are wont to be

⁵⁰ Riccaltoun’s *A Sober Enquiry and A Review of an Essay upon Gospel and Field Preaching* in particular, along with Boston’s 1726 edition of *The Marrow* with copious notes.

⁵¹ Ferguson, *The Grace of God in the Gospel*, pp. 17-18.

⁵² *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 27, p. 600; vol. 32, pp. 580-81, (quoted in I. Murray, *Spurgeon vs Hyper-Calvinism*, pp. 113-14).

⁵³ *Spurgeon vs Hyper-Calvinism*, p. 120.

THE MARROW AND THE DRY BONES

proud of their Reformed orthodoxy, then the message is clear. God does not find

unanointed orthodoxy less of an abomination than unanointed liberalism. God is the God of truth, and it is truth that he honours ... but truth, of itself, does not save. You do not change men simply by promulgating decrees, or by firing distant salvos at unbelief and ungodliness. It is truth anointed by the Spirit, preached by crucified men, watered by the tears of saints, and thrust into men's hearts to do its death-dealing, life giving work—*this is what God blesses, and this is what saves*'.

It could have been spoken by Thomas Boston!

⁵⁴ T. Swanston, *A Stranger in a Strange Land* (Fearn, 1991), pp. 56-7 (italics mine).